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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000233

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THANKS BUT- CHIANG MAI STRUGGLES WITH DEVELOPMENT DESIGNED IN BANGKOK

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11. Summary. After three years of rosy official promises and assorted citizen protests, the Chiang Mai Night Safari's long-delayed unveiling during the Loy Krathong celebration has been quietly pushed back in influence. End summary.

12. Under the guise of giving tourists "something to do at night" Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra proposed a Chiang Mai Night Safari in 2002

13. Undeterred by citizen concerns or the lowered revenue expectations of the Night Safari, the government is following suit with a new series of projects under the umbrella name of Chiang Mai World. A group calling itself the "Love Chiang Mai Alliance" delivered a petition to the governor October 17 requesting more information and a voice in the planning but has yet

KEEP THOSE TOURISTS BUSY

14. Thaksin, who has pledged to help develop his hometown, is an avid proponent of turning Chiang Mai into a major tourist hub. Tour businesses welcome the idea, citing Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) statistics that show the average visitor spends only 2.7 days in Chiang Mai. According to this view, nocturnal attractions in the city are limited to the Night Bazaar, "Khantoke" dinner shows, pubs and restaurants, and cabaret shows. Promoters of the Ni

15. Lined up in opposition are environmental, animal rights, and civic groups that have objected to almost every aspect of the 1.2 billion baht (US \$30 million) Night Safari -- location, importation of animals from nature reserves in Kenya and Australia, consumption of Even the name is problematic, in light of Singapore's copyright on the title.

FAUX OPENING

16. In a reprise of Prime Minister Thaksin's symbolic landing at Bangkok's not-yet-completed Suwannaphumi Airport in September, the November 16 ceremony at the Night Safari will not mean the start of opera

17. The newly introduced business sponsorship idea suggests that the government needs an infusion of private cash despite the original rosy ex project for seven years until it becomes self-supporting. In line with these adjustments the director of the project stated November 7 that the Night Safari is "not profit oriented. We just want to provi

18. The high hopes of surrounding communities were similarly dampened as promised business opportunities failed to materialize. Only 5 percer

BIG PLANS, LITTLE INFORMATION

19. According to the "Love Chiang Mai Alliance," Bangkok now

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plans to expand the Night Safari to include an elephant park, the "Royal Flora Rajapreuk 2006" International Horticultural Exposition, a spa,

110. Among all these ambitious plans, the government has officially announced only the elephant park and the Ministry of Agriculture's horticultural expo. The head of the Chiang Mai Chamber of Commerce has called on the government to provide details of the projects, noting that "local people should be informed and be able to As yet no additional information on the development plans has been forthcoming.

111. Comment: With the latest Chiang Mai World ideas, the Bangkok administration appears to be playing "whack-a-mole" with activist groups, t